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ABSTRACT

Electronic mail-based tutoring of undergraduate writing students upsets the temporal basis of the face-to-face paradigm for writing tutorials. Taking place in real time in a specified place, the face-to-face tutorial session has a beginning, middle and end. Further, the session must have a tangible point. By contrast, in on-line tutoring, time is boundless; the power dynamics of tutoring is changed, and the text itself is decentered. Such a system fosters an informal dialogue at the level of ideas instead of personality. Without the distracting elements of personality, computer mediated discourse establishes a more egalitarian atmosphere. The catch-all theory is that the paper-bound environment creates vertical relationships while the paperless environment creates horizontal relationships, precisely because the student's "property" (in the paperless environment) is disembodied, less clearly marked. In a electronically based exchange, the teacher asks the student, implicitly or explicitly, to re-envision his or her writing, to use writing to improve his or her writing. The pedagogical idea is to encourage students to write by telling them how their words affected the teacher while he or she read them, to give them what Peter Elbow calls a "movie of the mind." The goal of electronic-based tutoring must never be to fix meaning on the page but to engage meaning in a dialectic. Ambiguity is a must, as are open texts. (TB)

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ED 370 102

David Coogan

Towards a Rhetoric of On-line Tutoring

In the spring of 1993 I got this great idea: why not turn a writing tutorial into an actual writing tutorial? So often writing center tutorials have nothing to do with the act of writing. Students read aloud, make conversation, do some editing or planning, but rarely compose or communicate in writing. And there is no guilt here: As Stephen North reminds us in "Training Tutors To Talk About Writing," the student's "text is essentially a medium" for conversation (439), a starting point, a place to *begin* the session, not end it. But what would happen to that conversation if I took away the paper, took away speech, and took away physical presence? What would happen to the idea of a writing tutorial if we decided to make the act of writing the main event?

To test this idea, I decided to conduct writing tutorials over electronic mail. I wanted to see how such interaction would work. My plan went like this: students would send me their texts and questions over e-mail during posted hours and I would respond right away. The motive was to exchange lots of e-mail --say, over the course of an hour. In a sense, I wanted to replicate the conditions of face to face tutoring: two people conversing about a text. What I learned, however, (surprise, surprise) was that e-mail could not --and probably should not-- replicate the conditions of face to face tutorials. Virtual appointments were hard to keep, and hardly anyone actually made contact with me during the posted hours (Sunday-Tuesday 7:00 p.m. - 12: 00 a.m.).

It was just as well. The advantage of e-mail, I soon found out, was that you didn't need an appointment. You didn't even need regular hours for

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drop in sessions. I began to advertise quick turn-around instead of appointments: "Send your text whenever you want. Get a response within six hours!" This became the drop-everything-and-tutor method. Instead of sitting in front of the monitor "doing time" waiting for someone to send me some e-mail, I'd log on every other hour: when there was e-mail, there was a session.

From these new working conditions, I began to figure out a methodology of e-mail tutoring. The main difference underlying all the issues I discuss below is that e-mail changes our sense of time, and in so doing, it changes the power dynamics of tutoring. After all, a face to face tutorial takes place in real time. It is bound by beginning, middle, and end. A session must have a point. And we often feel cheated if there is no point. (We're not comfortable with "dead air".) We even have to train ourselves to recognize different kinds of silence so that it doesn't <u>feel</u> like dead air. But e-mail tutorials have nothing but dead air. They are mute, silent --like any text. Often they take place over a few days. They are open ended, sprawling, not bound by the hour or the actual writing center. E-mail tutorials could happen anywhere, anytime.[1]

These sessions are also solitary. They take place at the scene of writing. Wherever the student and tutor may be --in a crowded user room, or a room of one's own off campus-- the student and tutor extend themselves into a social space, but only in their minds, only in writing. The tutor's job is to create a textual scene of learning. In this scene, the tutor and the student have time --perhaps too much time-- to revise their thoughts and <u>construct</u> the tutorial. They become aware --even self conscious-- of their emerging

[1] However, access to the writing center doesn't neccessarily get easier. In fact, it may get harder. Many students don't know how to do e-mail, let alone upload files. (And it goes without saying that many students don't have PCs and modems in their rooms.)

rhetorical identity: "tutor" and "student" become characters in a story, elements of an instructional "plot." Phatic cues no longer set the scene. All we have is text.

As we know from the writing center, presence is everything. A student wears his paper like clothing, often asking right away, "how does this look to you? Is it ok?" The paper doesn't communicate by itself --the person communicates. But an electronic text *announces itself* as communication. It arrives in the mail without the benefit of speech to support its content, defend its appearance, or in other ways indicate who (or what) is inside. Thus in a face to face meeting, the student and tutor talk "over" a paper. The paper connects them. They see the same text. And the paper creates tension: who touches it? reads from it? marks it? The underlying question soon becomes, what will be DONE to the paper? As a methodology, then, the f2f tutorial is grounded by paper, and The Paper can limit tutor-student interaction.

In his experiment with an asynchronous, e-mail based writing class, Ted Jennings concludes that

> The crucial difference between the paper-bound and paperless environment lies in how a writer's texts are perceived. In the electronic medium they are harder to 'own', harder to posses and defend, than are tangible pseudo-permanent sheaves of paper. Sharing an electronic text does not imply giving it away, and telling writers what you remember about their texts is not like defacing their intellectual property. (47)

The catch-all theory is that the paper-bound environment creates vertical relationships while the paperless environment creates horizontal relationships, precisely because the student's "property" (in the paperless environment) is disembodied, less clearly marked. When students send me their electronic texts and we correspond, I'm asking them --implicitly or

explicitly-- to re-envision their writing: to use writing to improve their writing. I'm not asking them to focus on line five of the paragraph six. The pedagogical idea is to encourage them to write by telling them how their words affected me while I read them; give them what Peter Elbow calls in Writing Without Teachers, a "movie of my mind" --a rendering of their text. In turn, the student stretches out to "me", the *idea* of a tutor, and in the process stretches her own thinking, her own writing. The net result is a bunch of e-mail stretched out on a clothes line.

Of course, movies of the mind are nothing new. Perhaps the only innovation here is that email leaves a tangible trace --a transcript of the interaction. Pedagogically, we could even say that *nothing* has changed. The spirit of tutoring --intervention in the composing process-- remains in tact along with the political issues that define that intervention. But the actual tutorial becomes something different. Classroom teachers who teach in a networked environment describe a similar change. Thomas Barker and Fred Kemp say that "using the computer as a communication medium 'purifies' informal exchanges in interesting and pedagogically advantageous ways" (21). They go on to praise computer conferencing for its ability to cut to the chase, to foster a "pure", informal dialogue at the level of ideas instead of personality. Without the "distracting" elements of personality, computer mediated discourse establishes a more egalitarian atmosphere. No one has to compete for the floor.

But without the classroom context, which Barker and Kemp rely on, how might on-line tutors gauge learning, or even communication, as discourse-specific? More to the point: as a cyborg tutor, am I an integral part of the writer's world or a ghost in the machine? Does my discourse construct

a tutorial setting? Or does my discourse become something else? The fuel for somebody else's fire...

E-mail tutoring, so it seems, puts us smack dab in the middle of the postmodern condition --the critique of presence in discourse. We hold onto this idea of "personality" in order to make tutoring work. But as Barker and Kemp show us, computer-mediated discourse reduces the guiding logic of personality. This makes it fascinating, but also confusing. I like the idea of intuiting a writer "in" the text. (I like to imagine I'm helping a real person.) But what I intuit ("who" I imagine) has nothing to do with the writer, per se. As Roland Barthes says, "I must seek out this reader (must 'cruise' him) without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site; the possibility of a dialectics of desire" (4).

This, of course, is tricky turf and I'm no postmodern theorist. In fact I'd rather keep this essay practical. But I bring up Roland Barthes to raise the specter of textual indeterminacy --our best laid plans to create a scene of learning slipping down a chain of signifiers. My instinct is to fight this.

Let me put it to you this way. In face to face tutorials, half the job is reading the person, paying attention to silences, tone of voice, body language, and so on. In on-line tutoring there is no difference between reading a person and reading a text. The threat seems to be that we could lose the tutorial by forgetting about these imaginary students we are helping. Another threat is more practical: e-mail tutoring lavishes a lot of time on the student's text --it takes a while to read and respond-- and there is no guarantee that anything will happen. The student might not respond. (A challenge for the 21st century: how can we shape our e-mail instruction to elicit response and create a scene of learning?)

Michael Marx's study on e-mail exchanges between students in two composition courses at different colleges, explores the rhetoric of anonymous instruction. Students had to read essays by writers they had never met and write "critique letters", much like on-line tutors write feedback and questions to writers they have never met. The students' reactions to this experiment were complex. On the one hand, Marx indicates anonymous feedback was easy:

> At the end of the semester one Skidmore student summarized her experience of writing for the network: 'When writing to someone in class, I can talk to them if they do not understand a point. When writing to Babson [college], I found that I was concentrating on giving a complete critique. I also found new freedom because I did not have to worry about the Babson student getting upset with me.' (31)

But on the other hand, e-mail critiques were demanding --more focused and intense. Another student comments, "I wanted to make sure that I made useful suggestions because they couldn't get in touch with me; so my critique needed to be self explanatory" (34). Marx concludes that e-mail "creates a distance between student critics and student authors which, ironically brings students closer together in analyzing and discussing written texts" (36). The pressure to communicate fights the pressure of ambiguity.

But even that's not enough. As Andrew Feenberg summarizes, "communicating on-line involves a minor but real personal risk, and a response --any response-- is generally interpreted as a success while silence means failure" (24). If Feenberg is right, and I think he is, then the goal of an on-line tutorial must never be to fix meaning on the "page" but to engage meaning in a dialectic. We need ambigutity. We need open texts. Ironically, ambiguity works *for* us and *against* us. In a different context, Stephen North describes this dialectic between readers as acts of "textual good faith."

Specifically, he describes his written correspondence with David Bartholomae, and more generally, the impulse to find 'common sense' in Composition Studies, as "negotiating (establishing, maintaining) good faith agreements about the conditions that will make it possible for us to communicate. Or, to put it another way, negotiating (establishing, maintaining) good faith agreements about which of the conditions that make communication impossible we will set aside so that we can communicate" (Personal Writing 117). When e-mail tutorials work, so it seems, they work by engaging this dialectic. They work when we somehow negotiate a scene of learning.

One graduate student sends me a long philosophy paper and asks if his main idea is coming across. He wants to send the paper out for publication. I read the text, comment extensively in six separate messages (snapshots of my mind), and we correspond for about a week. The ideas percolate. A relationship forms. Eventually we meet in the writing center to talk about the paperbound issues: sentence level stuff, the actual length of the manuscript, bibliography, and so on. We are both encouraged and amazed at the novelty of this arrangement. Where else in the university can two people correspond about a work-in-progress? As a partner to the face to face tutorial, or even a solo act, e-mail could help us sustain long term instructional relationships, much like Bitnet discussion groups such as WCENTER or MBU help us sustain our own professional relationships.

This of course represents the ideal. I *dream a network nation where we all exchange our texts.* But there is no network nation, at least not the kind I imagine. The technology, itself, is not the problem. The internet is certainly growing. CCCC will be on-line in 1995. But who in the university values the lateral exchange of texts?, the "pure" exchange of ideas unfastened

from the classroom? Let me be specific, here. For students to even *use* the on-line tutorial service at SUNY-Albany, they need to know how to use a word processor, save an ASCII (text-only) file, upload it to the VAX mainframe, and send it to the virtual writing center as an e-mail message. That's asking a lot --especially on a campus where most computer labs are NOT linked to the mainframe, and posters for the service have to compete with commercial advertisements for proofreading services. Advertisements on the mainframe, though successful, tend to lure students more interested in computing then in writing (an unfortunate division of talent). The vast majority of paper-writers (students in the humanities and social sciences) don't know about the email tutorial service. How could they?

I guess what I'm concluding is that the idea of e-mail tutoring cannot change these institutional politics. I can dream a network nation if I want. But the reality is something else. Again, this is not a technical problem. We just don't know what we want technology to do. The university and the larger society still value paper, intellectual property, and Authorship (all deregulated on the net), and the writing center --for good reason-- still values face-to-face interaction over a text. But while we continue to work face to face, new technologies such as e-mail will continue to grow. If we don't decide what to do with them somebody else will. As the writing center moves into the 21st century, I'd urge us to grab the bull by the horns: we should have a say. That's our responsibility. This essay is just one attempt to imagine the future. But what the on-line tutorial will *actually* become is something we are just beginning to understand.

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